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ABSTRACT

Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I evaluation was mandated by Congress in 1974, and three RMC models were devised to provide comparability and flexibility for this evaluation. This paper evaluates the utility of the Title I evaluation models. The first section considers the critical import of past evaluation efforts. The development of a coherent evaluation strategy involves making hard choices and most evaluation plans are imperfectly executed. The next section explores the utility of the models for decisions at the federal level. Problems concern determining appropriate levels of funding, targeting funds according to student needs, and discovering effective practices. This is followed by a discussion of what the RMC models may contribute toward local or state-generated improvements. Systematic data are at a premium at both state and local decision making levels and parent groups often need help in obtaining information about their schools. The final section concludes that the major utility or justification for the RMC models is at the local level as state education agencies are encouraged to accept greater responsibility for monitoring local Title I projects. (Author/CTM)

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THE RELEVANCE OF THE RMC MODELS FOR TITLE I POLICY CONCERNS

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I. Introduction

In 1973, when Congress began to hold hearings on renewal of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the program was eight years old, and had cost more than $10 billion. Although the clear purpose of the program was to enhance the educational opportunities of disadvantaged youngsters in high poverty areas, and millions of dollars had been spent in earlier evaluation efforts, there was almost no information available on the effectiveness of Title I services. Frustrated by uncertainty about the success of the program, Congress responded, in the Education Amendments of 1974, with an unprecedented set of evaluation requirements. Section 151 directed the Commissioner of Education to:

- "publish standards for evaluation of project effectiveness",
- provide "models" for evaluations, which include "uniform procedures and criteria" to be utilized by State and local education agencies (SEA's, LEA's),
- provide "technical assistance" to enable SEA's to assist the LEA's in carrying out the evaluation of programs "in accordance with the models",
- specify "objective criteria" and "techniques" for producing "comparable State and national data", and
- develop a system for dissemination of evaluation results, including identified exemplary programs.

To carry out this legislative mandate, the Office of Education contracted with the RMC Research Corporation to develop models for evaluating gains in basic skills achieved by local Title I projects. Each of the three RMC models includes pre and post-treatment testing, a method of estimating "baseline" gains in the absence of Title I services, and procedures for converting local test results into "normal curve equivalents" that will permit aggregation across projects. In addition to estimates of learning

gains, the reporting system will provide information on five other project characteristics: average duration of Title I services per week, pupil-teacher ratios, expenditures per child, total numbers of participants, and average achievement levels at the start of the treatment period. What the reporting system lacks in depth, it more than makes up for in scope: about 30,000 Title I projects operating in 50,000 schools will be covered, and this involves the testing of some five million children. Moreover, despite generous concessions to local preferences in testing, the system provides a common framework and a common metric, thus promising to give us for the first time meaningful estimates of the program's impact for all States and the nation.

This paper evaluates the utility of the Title I evaluation models in four sections. The first section considers the critical import of past evaluation efforts. The next section explores the utility of the models for decisions at the Federal level, and this is followed by a discussion of what the models may contribute toward local or State generated improvements. Finally, in the concluding section we present some remarks on the overall utility of the Title I evaluation requirements.

II. AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The history of Title I evaluation efforts through 1972 has been ably chronicled by Milbrey McLaughlin.[1] It is not a history that inspires optimism. Reading McLaughlin's account, one is left with three central impressions, all of which cast doubt on the possibility or likelihood of our getting and using information about the Title I program. First, the interest in obtaining information has often been subsidiary to other

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[1] McLaughlin, Milbrey W., Evaluation and Reform, Rand Corporation, 1975.

considerations (building empires, proving a thesis, maintaining good relationships); second, educators are frequently reluctant to provide information (because of perceived threats to professional autonomy and local control, or because the expected benefits are so modest compared to the effort required); and third, there are serious questions about our readiness to use such information as is actually obtained. On this last point, McLaughlin observes that much of the support enjoyed by the program in Congress and among the States has stemmed from the judgment that it offered a politically feasible method of providing support to school districts. From this standpoint, it follows that one would only want information about the amounts being distributed, and that evaluations of program effects would be perceived as threatening to undermine the program's compensatory education rationale, thereby weakening the consensus for its continued support.

While other observers might dispute Dr. McLaughlin's pessimistic appraisal, the fact remains that after ten years of effort, solid data on which to base national program decisions are still generally lacking.[2] Efforts to obtain information, either directly (by Federally administered surveys) or indirectly (by mining the contents of locally generated evaluations) have encountered serious difficulities. Compilations of <u>locally</u> furnished evaluations have suffered from incomplete or unrepresentative reporting and the use of non-comparable or subjective measures. For example, in the first major Title I evaluation using school district data, analyzable pre- and post-achievement information was obtained from only 9 percent of all responses in 1976-1968 and 7.5 percent in 1967-1969.[3] A study of the achievement

[2] For a review of this period see the July 1977 report of American Institutes for Research: "Summaries of Major Title I Evaluations, 1966-1976".

[3] <u>Ibid.</u>, pp. 41 and 50.

data prepared by the States and submitted to the Office of Education found only 24 of 91 reports that were not "probably" or "certainly" biased, and only 7 of these reports presented data in a form permitting aggregation across States.[4] Four years later, a study by Stanford Research Institute observed some improvement in the quality of State-reported achievement data, but even when researchers went back to the States to improve their report quality, a maximum of 33 States in any single grade and year met reasonable standards of accuracy.[5]

Direct approaches, involving nationally administered surveys of Title I projects have encountered other difficulties. The first of this type, proposed by the Office of Program Planning and Evaluation (OPPE) in the Office of Education, was effectively vetoed by the Chief State School Officers, who saw it as high-handed and possibly threatening.[6] More recent evaluation efforts designed along the same lines — noteably the national Sustaining Effects longitudinal study — have been criticized as excessively time-consuming and failing to provide meaningful results at the LEA level.

In the context of these two approaches to evaluation — direct, or "top-down" and indirect, or "bottom-up" — The RMC models approach may be viewed as a compromise. While their design has been specified at the Federal level

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[4] Wargo, M.J. et al, ESEA Title I: A Reanalysis and Synthesis of of Evaluation Data from Fiscal Year 1965 Though 1970, American Institutes for Research, 1972.

[5] Thomas, T.C., Pelavin, S.H. Patterns of ESEA Title I Reading Achievement. Stanford Research Institute, 1976.

[6] This "Coleman Revisited" plan was designed to evaluate progress made between 1965 and 1968 in reducing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. For an account of its birth and demise, see McLaughlin, op.cit., pp. 84-86.

their implementation is dependent on local participation and results will be channelled through SEA's. Where national surveys have offered information on only a small sample of the more than 30,000 Title I projects, the RMC models approach holds the promise of achieving complete coverage, but this is at the expense of detailed information about individual projects.

Two points stand out in a review of past evaluation efforts. First, the development of a coherent evaluation strategy involves making some hard choices, and this means that any single study cannot hope to satisfy all the demands for information on a program as complex as Title I. Secondly, most evaluation plans are imperfectly executed, with the result that actual benefits are sometimes considerably less than anticipated. In commenting on the utility of the RMC models, both of these points should be kept in mind. Specifically, our discussion is focused on what the models will contribute in a positive way toward meeting existing informational needs on the assumption of their being successfully implemented.

III. UTILITY OF EVALUATING THE RMC MODELS AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

Evaluation data can help improve implementation of the Title I program in a number of respects. Annually, Federal budget analysts seek information that will help them evaluate the claims of major programs competing for scarce dollars. Further, every three or four years, renewal of Title I legislation raises basic questions of how available funds should be allocated. In this connection, there is considerable interest in linking fiscal characteristics of local programs to measures of student needs. Another legislative concern is the specification of administrative guidelines for local programs -- particularly as these may relate to effective educational practice. In

what follows, we will consider the usefulness of the RMC models for addressing each of these three concerns.

Determining Appropriation Levels

Federal budget examiners like to point out that the values or aspirations associated with a program should not be confused with the question of whether it is actually achieving results. From this point of view, direct measures of aggregate outcomes are needed that can be balanced against current expenditure levels. Such a view is central to the "zero-based" budgeting system (ZBBS) currently advocated by the Carter Administration. In strict theory, program funding from year to year should depend on hard evidence of significant results, and in default of such evidence, the program would be "zeroed out".

On its face, the RMC approach appears to offer precisely what the ZBBS advocates are calling for: a national measure of aggregate performance gains attributable to Title I projects. It is unlikely, however, that future appropriation levels will be influenced by these results. For many members of Congress, purely descriptive data on the types of services being provided by Title I is sufficient justification for the program's continuance. The recent NIE study provides this type of information in abundance, and has been very well received on the Hill.[7] Apparently support for the program rests more on an appreciation of its inputs at the local level than on its outputs. The steady

[7] Christopher Cross, Minority Staff Director, House Education and Labor Committee, has speculated "that the NIE study will be the single most productive piece of evaluation work ever undertaken on a Federal education program. It may well be the most productive evaluation work of any executive branch agency." ("Title I Evaluation—A Case Study in Congression Frustration". Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association in Toronto, Canada, March 28, 1979).

growth of appro priations over the years, despite very mixed evaluation results is perhaps the best evidence of this (from $1.5 billion in 1965 to nearly $3 billion in 1979).

Judging fr om past experience, negative findings are more likely to provoke reactio ns against the evaluation effort than the program. Attention will be directed to any defects in the implementation of the evaluation models, and mar y groups will come forward once again to question whether valid measures of pro ductivity are even possible — in education generally or the Title I progra in particular.[8]

Targeting of T tle I Funds

Since its inception, Title I funds have been apportioned among local school districts larg ly on the basis of numbers of children in poverty and the level of per pupil expe ditures in the States. The method of payment associated with this formula rests n two assumptions: that the number of children requiring compensatory services will e roughly equal to the number in poverty, and that these supplemental s rvices should be distributed in a way that insures a significant increment over the services provided in the basic program of education.[9] The current fo mula does not provide any extra payments to districts which may have special p oblems because of very high concentrations of poor students.

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[8] Milbrey M Laughlin appears to believe there are serious questions about whether t he Title I program can ever be rigorously evaluated. Specifically, she speak s of "an incongruence between the analytical paradigm and the Title I p rogram." (p.74, op.cit.)

[9] The Title I formula provision actually provides for a payment rate of 40 percen t of a State's per pupil expenditures, within 32 percent and 48 percen t of national average expenditures. The payment limits around na tional average expenditures are intended to provide some equalizat ion of compensatory funding across States with very high and very low spending levels.

The new Title I targeting provision proposed by the Carter Administration attempts to correct this omission in the current formula.[10] Accordingly, the Carter proposal will distribute an additional $400 million to districts with poverty children in excess of 20 percent or 5,000. Arguments cited in support of this proposal include higher costs of education in inner-city districts (resulting in reduced levels of service), the need in poor districts to compensate for deficiencies in the base program, and the greater educational disadvantagement of children in high poverty areas.

One assumption underlying the targeting provision is that larger service increments are required to achieve comparable gains in districts with concentrations of low income children, even when the initial disadvantagement of project children is held constant. Tests of this assumption are possible, using the RMC measures of program effects, but the success of the effort will depend on two factors. First, reporting on Title I projects at the school level must be reasonably complete, and second, the RMC data must be linked with existing information on expenditures and student population characteristics at the district level.

By itself, information on project characteristics provided by the RMC models reporting system will not be adequate.[11] To estimate service increments, project dollars must be related to expenditures for the basic program, and these figures adjusted across districts for differences in costs

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[10] See testimony of Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., before the House Education and Labor Committee, February 28, 1978.

[11] As previously noted, there will be just six items of data per project: average duration of compensatory services per week, pupil-teacher ratio, project dollars per child, project enrollment, pre-test results, and pre/post test gains.

of education (e.g.: teacher salaries) to yield a more accurate estimate of actual services. Student population characteristics are necessary to estimate the level of disadvantagement in the district. LEA and school building codes are essential for making the data linkage with administrative records.

Another interesting allocative question has been raised recently by Congressman Quie's proposal to base the distribution of Title I funds exclusively on measures of educational disadvantagement. The potential impact of this proposal on the pattern of needs addressed by Title I projects was partially considered by the NIE study, but what it would mean in terms of project participation, nationwide, is a matter of considerable interest.[12] Unfortunately, the RMC models reporting system will tell us nothing about the poverty status of project participants, nor will it offer any direct information about the educational disadvantagement of other children in the same school.

Knowledge of Effective Practices

The Federal government has shied away from dictating local practice in the design of Title I programs. Nevertheless, through program information menoranda and recommendations based on local project monitoring reviews, considerable influence is exerted in the area of design. Federal officials have used these mechanisms with some measure of success to encourage local projects to concentrate Title I efforts in the early grades

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[12] See "Using Achievement Test Scores to Allocate Title I Funds", National Institute of Education, September 30, 1977. Relative changes are estimated for 34 States, using reading test results for grades 4-6. A second report, "Demonstration Studies of Funds Allocation Within Districts", examines the effects of greater reliance on achievement measures in 13 local projects over a two-year period.

and on limited numbers of participants, instead of spreading resources thinly to all eligible schools and students. Although the presumed advantages of early intervention and larger expenditures per child are being questioned by recent research, the point remains that when originally implemented, these strategies reflected the best current thinking on educational practice. The Office of Education has a continuing mandate to encourage the spread of effective practices through its dissemination activities, such as the national diffusion network.

There is a clear need for information about effective educational practices, but the current reporting system is not designed to permit inferences about methods of instruction. This information would have to be gathered through a follow-on study. One possible strategy would be to identify the most effective Title I projects from the data collected through the Title I evaluation network and then retrospectively document their major features. Unfortunately, there is a serious question as to whether results obtained by this method would lend themselves to dissemination activities. The Office of Education has tried just such an approach in the form of its Project Information Packages (PIP's), and recent evaluations suggest that the PIP's projects do not retain their past effectiveness when replicated.[13] One possible explanation is that project outcomes are influenced by inadequately documented characteristics of the basic program of education on which compensatory projects must build. A further difficulty in attempting to transplant whole projects is that "minor" changes made to adapt the model to local circumstances can sometimes have major effects.

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[13] Stearns, Marian S. Evaluation of the Field Test of Project Information Packages: Volume 1, Summary Report. Stanford Research Institute, April 1977.

If the state of our knowledge doesn't permit identification and transfer of whole programs, then a more realistic research and evaluation strategy is to concentrate on identifying particular program elements that contribute to effectiveness. Combining these promising components into a total program would then be a task for local project designers. Here again, there are problems. First of all, retrospective inquiries into components of successful projects often amount to self-diagnosis, with all the attendant dangers of selective remembering and reporting. Secondly, the description of characteristics is difficult to standardize. Many widely used descriptors (e.g., "individualized education programs") subsume such a wide range of practices as to be virtually meaningless.[14]

As a general strategy, there is much to commend the "detect, diagnose, and disseminate" approach to improving local projects. Our readiness to confront the difficulties of diagnosis and dissemination is dependent, however, on the confidence we can place in the first step of detecting genuine differences in effectiveness.

As regards the RMC models, it is regrettable that the use of quasi-random designs was not possible, since they are especially powerful in detecting treatment effects.[15] To some extent, judgment on the confidence to be placed in the RMC results must be reserved. For example, we will

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[14] The confusion associated with the topic of individualized instruction is discussed in "Evaluating Compensatory Education", National Institute of Education, December 30, 1976. (Chapter IV, pp. 4-7).

[15] For a discussion of the usefulness of randomized designs as applied to Title I evaluations see, McLaughlin, Donald H. et al, "Controversies in the Evaluation of Compensatory Education", American Institutes for Research, July 1977 (pp. 25-30).

want to carefully examine the uses made of the Al model, since it assumes that treatment group children and those in the norming sample are similar with respect to race or socio-economic status. Changes in the composition of the treatment group between pre and post testing will also be a matter of some concern, since such changes can distort estimates of net gains or losses. This danger is illustrated by preliminary analysis of data from the OE longitudinal study, which fails to support the summer-falloff reported by a number of studies that utilized cross-sectional data.[16]

IV. UTILITY AT STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS

Ignorance and uncertainties at the Federal level have their counterparts at State and local levels. Even within the school building, the relative isolation of Title I project activities may permit principals to lose touch with the day-to-day realities of their program. At the State level, with modest resources for monitoring the hundreds — in a few States, the thousands — of local projects, systematic data are at a premium. Finally, concerned parent groups often find it difficult to obtain information about their local schools, in some cases because professional educators wish to discourage "meddling". Given these informational motives, will the results of the current evaluation effort provide the means and the opportunity? Where a negative answer to this question appears likely, we will want to explore the possibility of corrective action.

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[16] "A Study of Achievement Scores Over the Summer Months", Systems Development Corporation, 1978.

State and District Monitoring of Projects

Evidence of differential effectiveness has implications for action only when placed in a broader informational context. State and district administrators are often able to supply that context. Particularly in States with significant compensatory programs of their own — about a dozen at present — RMC results may be expected to have some impact on how State officials distribute their local project-monitoring and technical-assistance resources. Similar benefits might be expected in certain large urban districts with numerous Title I projects.

Unfortunately, many States undertake little if any comprehensive monitoring or technical assistance.[17] In such cases, the RMC data will be of negligible value. A stark fact is that States are not required to monitor or assist local Title I projects on any regular or systematic basis. This suggests adoption of proposals to strengthen State monitoring requirements, including the review of local project applications, and an analysis of current effectiveness data.

Beyond using the RMC results to focus attention on problem areas, some States and districts are likely to want to play the same role that the Office of Education assumes in its efforts to identify and disseminate effective education practices. While the same difficulties of diagnosing and transplanting will apply, State and district administrators enjoy one conspicuous advantage: they can prescribe standards directly affecting local practice and curriculum.

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[17] According to a recent report of the National Institute of Education ("Administration of Compensatory Education", September 19, 1977) a number of States failed to make any informational mailings, hold any conferences, or make any site visits to local districts in support of the Title I program during the 1975-1976 school year. (pp.51-52).

Individual Pro[illegible]ect Reforms

At the sc[illegible]ool-building level, the impact of the RMC data is more problematic. [illegible]wo factors are likely to be critical in determining actual levels of use: the d[illegible]gree of congruence of the RMC models with local approaches to evaluation and [illegible]the extent of outside "encouragement".

RMC resul[illegible]s based on general achievement tests will supply a reading on the overall perfor[illegible]ance of the school's compensatory program, but this is of limited value for diag[illegible]osis and management of the learning program. One annual achievement test is insuff[illegible]cient to pinpoint particular learning deficiencies. For informing the teacher on[illegible]e might prefer the more frequent application of very brief tests or "individual [illegible]exercises" that measure mastery of specific educational tasks. A series of di[illegible]fferent kinds of tests to diagnose pupil deficiencies, and monitor day-to-day lea[illegible]rning could prove more valuable for school managers than exclusive reliance on a [illegible]single testing instrument.[18] The Office of Education's technical assi[illegible]stance activities should encourage a recognition of the many different purposes serve[illegible]d by tests.

Where loc[illegible]al educators are reluctant to use effectiveness data, outside "encouragement[illegible]", whether from State and district officials or from parents, may make the [illegible]ifference. In this connection, a straightforward requirement that district Title [illegible]I plans contain evaluative data on student performance would be a good startin[illegible]g point, particularly when those plans must be reviewed by parent groups.

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[18] For an [illegible]verview of various uses of tests in improving education programs, see Imp[illegible]oving Educational Achievement, National Academy of Education Committ[illegible]e on Testing and Basic Skills. (Draft Report dated February 23, 1978).

Parental Involvement

Somewhat ironically, the evaluation requirement in the original Title I legislation stemmed from the conviction of Senator Robert Kennedy that parental involvement would help to insure that Title I funds were spent to assist disadvantaged children. As implemented, however, these local evaluations were merely another item in the flow of paper to State education agencies and then on to Washington.

Admiral Rickover has given more recent expression to the same idea. Rickover, a long-time advocate of testing, wants to see schools forced to send out report cards on themselves. With a formal system of national tests, he argues "parents would (finally) have a means to hold teachers and schools accountable for the quality of their work."[19]

The RMC model development is in keeping with the Kennedy/Rickover perspective, but the likelihood is not high that simply making evaluative information available will lead to parental involvement. Testing is already an integral component of elementary and secondary educational systems. The number of States adopting some form of minimal competency testing jumped from 8 to 31 in the recent 19-month period between April 1967 and November 1977, but the expected backlash from parents of children in low-scoring schools has not been forthcoming.[20]

It is unlikely that RMC model implementation will prove a more successful incentive to reform than has testing generally. The schools in high poverty areas served by Title I have traditionally been the most insulated from

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[19] Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, Testimony presented to the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, July 14, 1977.

[20] Education Commission of the States, Minimal Competency Testing, November 15, 1977 (Report No. 105)

parental pressures. Most parents of Title I children are totally unaware of their personal stake in a program of compensatory education. Moreover, few parents understand complex testing jargon, and the RMC model description and reporting procedures only worsen the problem. "Norm-referenced" and "Special Regression" models are bad enough, but reporting and publicizing test scores in normal-curve equivalents virtually guarantees that local reports will be unintelligible to all but highly trained professionals.

Some simple measures could be instituted to strengthen parental involvement in Title I programs. The least that should be done is to make sure parents are aware of their child's placement in a program of supplemental instruction. Moreover, the school should afford parents an opportunity for direct contact with teachers by requiring at least one or two meetings a year. The provision of inexpensive work books to those who request them could afford parents an opportunity for meaningful involvement in Title I projects. This type of awareness and contact is almost certainly a precondition for parental interest in test results and measures of overall program effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Can the investment in creating the RMC models evaluation network be justified solely on the basis of its informational utility? We think not, unless steps are taken to insure greater use at State and local levels. Nationally representative surveys are adequate for meeting most Federal information needs. Thus, what the RMC models contribute toward estimating aggregate program effects or evaluating certain of the assumptions which underlie the Title I allocation formula could be duplicated at a fraction

of the cost using a carefully designed sample. Moreover, Federal polic
concerns can be addressed only by linking the RMC results to data from
other sources — fiscal and administrative data at the district level,
detailed information on educational practices at the project level.

All too often, evaluation requirements are built into Federal prog
without considering who will be using the results and for what purposes
As we have noted, measures of project effectiveness could be of conside
value to SEA's in allocating their monitoring and technical assistance
resources. Judging from past experience, however, many States will fai
to exploit this potential unless steps are taken to spell out their
responsibilities in detail. For example, the Administration's current
legislative recommendations include provisions for increasing the funds
available to SEA's contingent on their accepting greater responsibiliti
for monitoring local Title I projects. The comprehehnsive scope of the
models evaluation network makes it especially suitable for this type of

At the local level, we have suggested a number of steps that could
be taken to stimulate greater use of the RMC results. It would be help
for example, to broaden the scope of technical assistance offered in
support of the evaluation effort to include an emphasis on short-term
diagnostic testing. Such tests would go a long way bridging the gap
between a single measure of net gains over the entire "treatment" peri
and the day-to-day realities of the classroom. The reluctance of some
school officials to respond to evaluative data of an unfavorable natur
a more difficult problem. As a start, we have suggested a straightfor
requirement that annual project reports make some use of objective

performance data, and that parents of Title I children be made aware of their stake in the program and the availability of information on its effectiveness.

While the scope of the current evaluation effort may be difficult to justify purely in terms of its immediate informational payoffs, we believe there will also be some indirect benefits. Two long-standing obstacles to evaluating Federal programs in education have been variations in local practice and lack of technical expertise. The example of the RMC models and the technical assistance offered in support of their implementation should help to reduce these obstacles, to the benefit of future evaluations.